

Get your kicks on Portugal's Route 66



Isabel Conway takes the slow road through the enchanting Alentejo region, whose charms are often missed by tourists in the race to the sunbeds of built up coastal resorts

I am very receptive to the forces of energy here." Our guide advances towards a high megalithic standing stone, while holding a thin copper rod in each hand in front of him. We watch them quiver, turn inwards and inexplicably cross each other as he draws ever closer to the monument in Portugal's Cromeleque dos Almendres.

Volunteering to test my own energy-harnessing powers, I imitate Professor Libanio Murteira Reis, an expert on his country's ancient places. But the copper remains ramrod straight in my sweaty grasp. I feel rather short-changed, but perhaps my lack of connection with the forces of energy comes down to the sweltering midday heat.

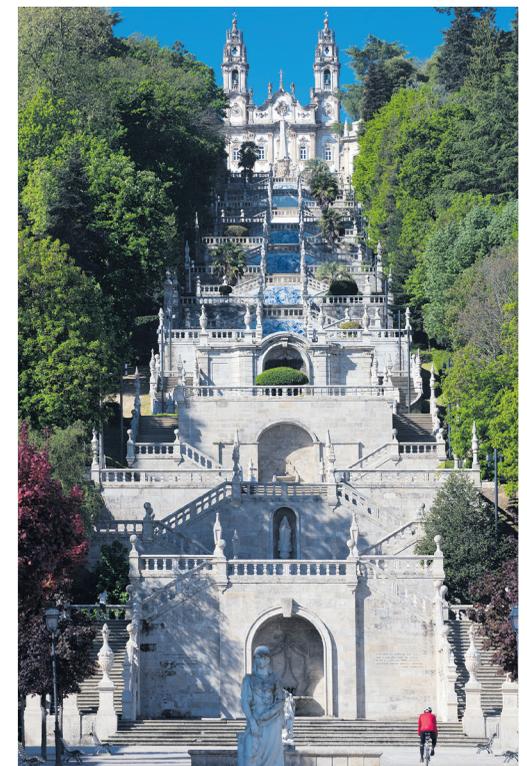
Portugal's Alentejo region is best known for vineyards and outstanding beaches along its coastline. Venture beyond oak forests and sleepy hamlets inland around world heritage city Evora, and you'll meet gentle hills, speckled with significant megalithic monuments. The best preserved stone circle, or cromlech, on the Iberian Peninsula, Cromeleque dos Almendres, consists of 95 chronologically placed standing stones, part of a ceremonial site dedicated to a celestial religion. Constructed over a long period and decorated with mysterious ancient patterns and

diagrams, the first stones are thought to date from 6,000 BC, making them thousands of years older than Stonehenge.

The professor and other experts believe the stones, some weighing a few tons and positioned from east to west were multifunctional, with uses including the calculation of the changing seasons. "This site is popular with New Age groups," he says. "I have found wheat offerings on top of stones and seen people meditate here. Now there's a growing problem with over-tourism and talk of controlling visits."

The far-flung location doesn't seem to deter visitors, who leave a minor road and take to the potholed dusty track for a further 5km, testing the suspension and tyres of many a rental vehicle. We've overnight accommodation quite close by at Imani Country House, a boutique luxury estate, whose 18th-century outbuildings are transformed into elegant bungalows with sunken baths and Hermès toiletries. An orange grove shades our small swimming pool.

By Portuguese standards it's a pricy spot. Imani, which rates high in reviews for its idyllic setting, farm-to-table food and honesty bar, is also hard to find. Signs mysteriously point to a 'Casa de Campo' with no mention of the actual name. Portuguese bureaucracy, I discover, prohibits them from putting up the usual sign because the luxury guesthouse-hotel



Top: the rolling hills and vineyards of Alentejo in Portugal; above: the Sanctuary of Nossa Senhora dos Remédios in the city of Lamego

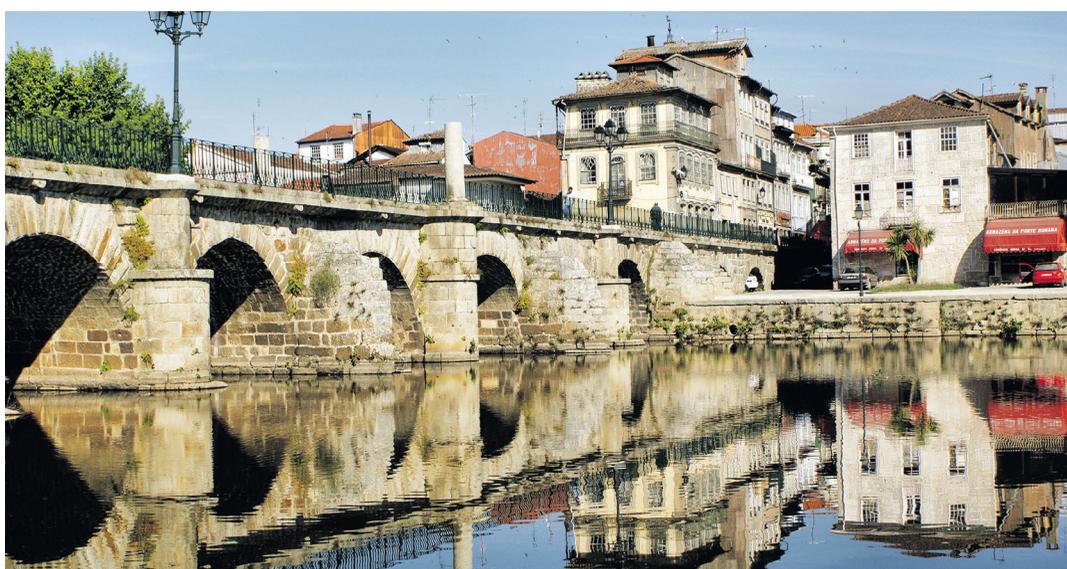
has fewer than ten bedrooms.

Following the old N2, Portugal's answer to Route 66, we take the road less travelled down the country's spine from north to south on a five-day slow exploration. Estrada Nacional 2 is the longest road in Portugal, officially 739km, passing through 35 municipalities with wondrous landscapes and an interesting diversity of very reasonably priced regional food and wines along the way. The N2 is also one of only three roads in the world to span a country from end to end in a continuous line.

We cross the vast river valleys of the famous port and wine-producing Douro, later the Mondego, Tejo and Zezere, climb mountains where our zippy Renault Captur's GPS falls silent in the narrow lane-ways of Lego-like villages. We arrive in monumental gracious baroque cities such as Lamego and Viseu, eventually reaching the Algarve via a long downhill journey full of corkscrew bends.

Like Jack Kerouac's epic jaunt over the asphalt, Thelma and Louise's adventures or Route 66, immortalised in books, music and movies, the lure of an exciting road trip is tempered by some trepidation.

Our journey entails detours, wrong turns and frustration here and there. We are directed more than once onto motorways from towns by well-meaning people unaware of the existence of the N2 or who have forgotten all about the route since their impressive network of EU-funded motorways was created.



Chaves: a quiet city near the Spanish border that is famous for its thermal waters

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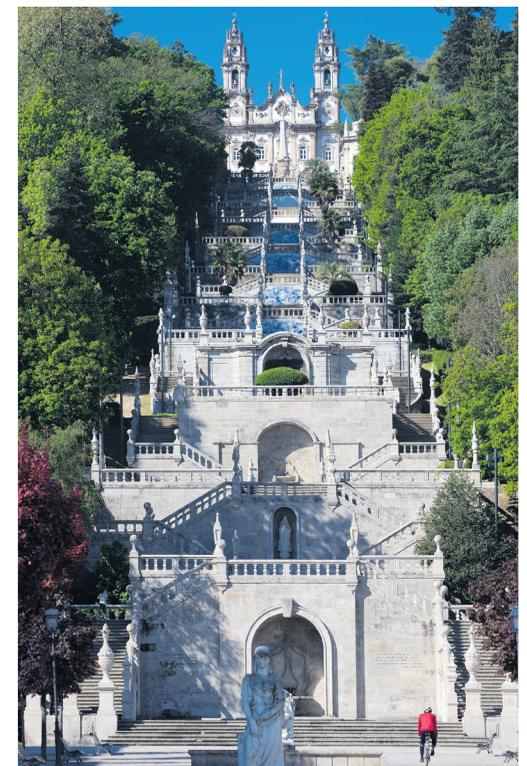
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